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THE PLACE OF SULPICIOUS SEVERUS IN MIRACLE-LITERATURE¹

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By the end of the fourth century the miracle-literature of Christianity had nearly run the gamut of styles in "signs and wonders." For the reader that has browsed somewhat widely does not need to be told that there are styles which come and go in literature, just as truly as in bodices or headgear. The exact genesis of each fashion, fad, or motif is not always traceable, to be sure. No more rational account can be given of the vogue of the empuse than of that of the mutton-leg sleeve. The religious or philosophical thought-currents of the period, the geographical contiguities of the place, or the popularity of some other world-famous tale go far, oftentimes, to explain the form in which a literary work is cast. In the literature of the Eastern church, for example, we find the conversion of the Jews brought about by means that suggest the *Arabian Nights'* *Entertainments*, amid an atmosphere reeking with the rankly foul odors of monasticism. In the story of the conversion of Scandinavia, again, the temper of the Vikings shines forth among aetiological accounts of the peculiar geographical conformation of the Norse coast. And when Jew-baiting became a popular amusement in Western Europe, St. William of Norwich, who was supposed to have been slain by the Jews, was for a time the most affected, and the most efficacious, saint on the English calendar. So far, indeed, as the recurrence of literary motifs is concerned, the apparent identity of ideas supposably far removed from each other in character and setting tempts the scoffer to give credence to Mark Twain's famous remark, that, after all, there are but two extant jokes. When one compares Lucian's discovery of the big island inside of the big fish

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with the unvarnished episode of Jonah and his "whale," he would fain throw up his hands, and ejaculate, "Well, then, to be sure, which was really first, the hen or the egg?"

The wonderful, the magical, or the genuinely miraculous makes an immediate appeal to the imagination and holds the interest of the reader perennially. Whether the narrative deal with so remarkable a series of adventures and hairbreadth escapes as is recounted in the story of Apollonius, king of Troy, or with bare-faced magic like that of Apuleius' *Golden Ass*, or with such a congeries of alleged miracles as the *Gospel of the Infancy*, the fascination of the reader is a striking revelation of human nature. The appetite for this sort of pleasure, once excited, is apt to become insatiate and, cloyed with recurring types, to demand ever new and increasingly marvelous wonders on which to feast. In his chapter on "Greek and Early Christian Novels," Mr. Glover remarks that "the characteristic introduction of the magical into biography must be remembered when we are dealing with the lives of the saints, for it is not peculiar to them; indeed it is often less noticeable there than in pagan works." Whenever that is the case we may well count it noteworthy; for in connection with religious, or quasi-religious, literature we must reckon not only with this keen human taste for the remarkable but also with the fact that in whatever deals with religion, or religious heroes, heroines, or devotees we are in a fair field for the display of the supernatural.

It is perfectly reasonable, then, that in the midst of the romancing spirit prevalent in the early centuries of our era the contagion appears in numerous false "Gospels," "Acts," and "Apocalypses," and similarly in the record of countless miracles connected with the lives of the holy men and women who have been the outstanding figures in the church. If the accounts which tradition has given us often transcend the bounds of credibility, we need not be too impatient with such credulity, when in our own day to minds of men like Sir Oliver Lodge and Dr. Conan Doyle the stammering vacuities of spiritualistic mediums seem mysteriously wonderful, and in our own midst thousands of cultured ladies and gentlemen have faith in "absent treatment" for what plain people call "disease." For that matter, we may not forget that

by millions of churchmen an enormous miracle-fabric of nearly two millennia, under the protecting mantle of an infallible see, is still taken seriously with a reverent faith.

If the Christian writers had confined themselves to the sort of miracles wrought by the Founder of Christianity as recounted in the canonical Gospels, our theme would be barren. Jesus Christ's miracles, according to the accepted versions of them, consisted chiefly in works of mercy and help, performed without ostentation and related without rhetorical embellishment or many details. Some thirty-four are enumerated in the four Gospels. Of these, three consisted of raising the dead, seventeen healed disease other than demoniac possession (whatever that may have been), and six were cases of "casting out devils." In five cases Jesus furnished abundant food or drink. When he calmed the tempest by the words, "Peace, be still," he seemed to be saving the lives of his companions. When he walked on the sea, it was to reach his disciples quickly with encouragement and help. Even in the blasting of the fruitless fig tree a moral lesson for his followers may be discerned. The last three miracles, indeed, contain an element of the spectacular, which might have been exploited by anybody but Jesus, and certainly would have been in any similar cases occurring at the behest of ecclesiastical "saints" of the succeeding centuries. But no suspicion of a desire to achieve the spectacular can be attributed in these cases to a teacher who frequently, in works of healing, charged the beneficiaries to "tell no man," who, when tempted to cast himself down from the pinnacle of the temple and at a master-stroke win the wondering allegiance of his countrymen, put the suggestion aside as a devilish one, and who, though he remarked that he might have summoned twelve legions of angels to his defense, did not summon them. It is worth noting, also, that though two or three conspicuous failures to work miracles on the part of the apostles are recorded in the canonical Gospels, no successful attempts are there described. Peter and his companions were taught humility by bitter experiences and were repeatedly discouraged from cultivating the spectacular.

The various pseudo-gospels that appeared in the early centuries after Christ are essentially propagandist literature, designed to

prove some doctrine and adapted especially to the taste and knowledge of their particular audience. The absurd mass of miracle drool set forth in the *First Gospel of the Infancy* is clearly intended to confute the reader who may be inclined to deny the divine nature of Jesus, and it is surrounded with a distinctly oriental and magical atmosphere. The child Jesus is no longer humble and self-denying, but arrogant, impulsive, arbitrary, and even cruel. He is described as an indifferent carpenter, but yet as able miraculously to change the size of a board that Joseph had sawed off too short. It is related how the mother of the child hangs out the infant's daily wash on a post. Along comes the demoniac son of the high priest of a great Egyptian idol, takes one of the swaddling clothes off the post and puts it on his head, with the astonishing result that "presently the devils began to come out of his mouth and fly away in the shapes of crows and serpents." A story of a boy that had been metamorphosed into a mule, suggests Apuleius; and on the same line Jesus is represented as amusing himself with turning his playmates into kids sporting about him as their shepherd, animating clay figures, and practicing his power of life and death upon those about him in so arbitrary a way that we read in the last verse of the twentieth chapter, "Then said Joseph to St. Mary, Henceforth we will not allow him to go out of the house; for every one who displeases him is killed."

Again the *Acts of Paul and Thecla* is calculated to teach the virtue of the celibate and the monastic life; and the adventures of the two worthies remind one infallibly of Jerome, and of Paula and Eustochium. The twin motifs, of hairbreadth escape from mortal peril and of the marvelous preservation of virginity, are so important a part of the tale that its novelistic nature is constantly forced upon the attention of the reader. In such a story the miracles described in detail are quite naturally those of the usual class connected with the early persecutions under Roman rule, where lions and other beasts refuse to kill the intended victims, fire refuses to consume them, and finally, in this case, the heroine, as a fitting "thrill," is translated through a wall of rock, reminding one of the legend of the "seven sleepers," which belongs to the same period and the same region.

The same kind of miracles appears in the *Peristephanon* of Prudentius, as for example in the martyrdom of Fructuosus, bishop of Tarragona, and his comrades, whom the fire refused to burn until the martyrs prayed that it might release them. For St. Vincent there is an abundance of sacred rhetoric whereby Prudentius describes the tortures of the saint in prison, where angelic light and magic flowers beautify the place, the refusal of beasts and birds to devour his corpse, as Elijah's raven appeared to frighten them off, and, as a crowning wonder, the race of the corpse with the vessel that had sailed out to sea to dump it far from land, back to port, in which race the pagan crew, of course, came out but a poor second!

This sort of spectacular miracle, be it remembered, evidently invented to win faith for the new religion and now becoming so popular, plays little part in the account of the early church in the *Acts of the Apostles*. Like their risen and ascended Master, the apostles worked some works of healing and saw some heavenly visions at critical times in their development (as in the case of Peter, Paul, and Stephen); but only rarely is any divine intervention recorded, to help their preaching or influence. Even the miraculous deliverance of Peter from prison was witnessed by himself only, its effect being essentially to prolong his time and opportunities for preaching the new gospel. Stephen and James die martyrs' deaths without any divine interference or impressive spectacles to convince their persecutors of their error. But as soon as Christianity was, while nominally exalted above other religions at Rome by being officially recognized as that of the state, in reality degraded to the level of the countless other religions that, one after another, had been similarly given official recognition by the government, the new faith, instead of recognizing its greatest power in its difference from the pagan cults of the time, attempted to bolster up its new prestige by claiming that it could do the same things that the other religions could.

Such was the temper of the Christian church and such the general style of Christian miracle-literature, when, near the close of the fourth century, we find developing a new variety of this literature, namely the monograph dealing with the life and the

wonderful experiences and achievements of some particular saint. Perhaps the prototype of this new style is to be sought in the *Life of Saint Anthony*, which is included among the writings of Athanasius, but which is believed by many to be a work of pure fiction. However that may be, it is worth while to note that Athanasius was in Gaul, as an exile, in the fourth century, and that it was in Gaul that there appeared the first certain and important example of this new type, the *Life of Saint Martin*, by Sulpicius Severus. What inspiration, if any, Severus may have gained from this source we must leave to conjecture. Gaul itself had become the seat of the most vital and progressive Christianity in Western Europe, and its literature was fast coming to pre-eminence in various fields. When, therefore, Severus became, as it has been happily said, the Boswell to St. Martin of Tours, he immediately won for that holy man the position of patron-saint of Gaul, i.e., France, and at the same time established for himself a position of unique influence upon the miracle-literature of succeeding centuries. A number of elements contributed to the instant and lasting success of the work of Severus. He was a highly educated man and used such excellent language and style as to command the respect of all classes. He wrote contemporaneously with the life of his hero and therefore presumably knew the facts before any opportunity had developed for the accretion of tradition. His simplicity and directness of statement are marred by little or no irrelevant detail, nothing apparently, of the romancing type so frequently met with in the preceding centuries as well as in his own time. The result, of course, was that his narrative at once demanded credence. This demand, moreover, is enforced by repeated protestations that he told only what he knew to be surely true. Indeed, at the end of the *Vita* he solemnly avers that he who should hesitate to believe his report would be a sinner.

To our day Severus appears a very credulous and unhistoric writer. But to those who lived in his own time the considerations we have mentioned outweighed any rational or scientific study of the narrative. An examination of the *Vita* shows that it is little else than a catalogue of wonders, suffused with an atmosphere of Martin's prayerfulness and saintliness. It embraces a wide

variety of miraculous events, with a striking similarity to Scripture antecedents, in many places. The number of miracles recounted in the *Vita* is not very different from the recorded miracles of Christ; in the epistles and dialogues, however, various others are added. The distribution of the miracles, moreover, is quite different from that in the Gospel narratives. Twice Martin raises the dead. He heals a paralytic, a leper, or a diseased eye. As an ordained exorcist, he of course recognizes devils easily, manifests his power over them, and casts them out at will, sometimes in a fantastic manner. He has remarkable prescience and wonderful answers to prayer. But besides these powers he can see marvelous visions, has many victorious encounters with his satanic majesty himself, and on several occasions performs most astounding miracles purely for the purpose of convincing unbelievers, i.e., as mere "signs." Furthermore, the magical use of the sign of the cross is frequently in evidence, and we find that faith in relics already firmly established which had crept into the church to a scandalizing degree and was to grow to monstrous proportions, though it had its tiny beginning merely in the touching of the hem of Christ's garment and its tardy increase in the handkerchiefs that had touched the body of Paul.

When Martin puts the devil to flight by quoting Scripture, or heals a paralytic girl at the supplication of her father (who exhibits remarkable faith) or casts a demon out of a pagan's slave after protesting that he could not go to the house of an outsider, or drives sea birds into the desert (as in the days of Jesus a group of devils has entered swine and then the sea), and when at his death his face is described as the face of an angel, the reminiscences of the Scripture are obvious. Similarly he directs his servant how to catch a fish on Friday, when all others have failed. He seems to be rather trying to improve on the Scripture methods when he has two angels sent to aid him in the destruction of a pagan shrine; and he distinctly contravenes the principles of Jesus when by the magical sign of the cross, at the challenge of his enemies, he compels a tree, which is being felled in front of another pagan shrine, where it would naturally fall upon himself, to fall in the reverse direction. A grim humor attends one instance of this use

of the sign of the cross when Martin suspected a procession seen in the distance of being intent upon pagan rites, when they actually, after being stopped and made to act grotesquely, proved to be only carrying a corpse out for burial. Another instance of the appreciation of the ridiculous by Severus is the anecdote of the rival named Defensor discomfited by a chance magical turning to the Scripture passage referring to the stilling of "the enemy and the *defensor*."

Severus picturesquely represents Martin's methods of circumventing the devil. When Satan took the form of Christ, with all his supposed heavenly paraphernalia, Martin tells him he shall not believe it is he unless he comes in the form and the garb of his suffering and bearing the marks of the cross. At this the devil vanishes like smoke, and leaves a stench so pronounced that there could be no doubt that it was verily "the old boy" himself. "And this," adds Severus gravely, "I heard from Martin's own lips, that no one may perchance think it a fabulous tale." When, on another occasion, Martin was nearly consumed in a fire while he was passing the night away from home, his danger was carefully explained by the lack of faith that in his confusion led him for a moment to try to escape instead of praying for deliverance and lying down again in the midst of the flames. On his remembering to do this, they instantly became like showers to quench the fire, and he was saved. Again, he made fire turn directly against the wind!

It never occurs to Severus, in his absolute faith, that the wind might have changed, or, when a letter from Martin was laid with healing power upon the breast of a sick girl, that a stocking around one's throat may always have medicinal effect, or that a lioness leading a hermit to her den and her blind whelps is but one of many well-authenticated cases of similar animal fellowship with man.

So far as this kind of story goes, Paulinus of Nola, the Campanian contemporary and friend of Severus, not only was influenced directly and powerfully by his work but could go him at least one better. Paulinus tells with enthusiasm of the over-fat hog that was unable to proceed on his journey to sacrifice but came volun-

tarily to the inn during the night and was standing there ready for the knife in the morning, and of a young heifer which likewise, though at first inclined to be refractory, at length went even eagerly to the slaughter, after being vowed for sacrifice.

It was this sort of sublime faith in himself on the part of Martin, and of Severus in his hero, that laid the foundations of the miracle-literature of Gaul, and indeed of all Western Europe, through the succeeding centuries. We have just spoken of Paulinus of Nola, and the transplanting of these legends to Italy through him. In Gaul itself it is incredible how many other writers copied, augmented, varied, and enlarged upon the theme so seriously, yet simply and briefly, treated by Sulpicius Severus. With Paulinus of Periguex, in the next century, it has already become an epic poem of six books, with more than thirty-five hundred verses and abundant rhetorical embellishment as well as additions relative to miracles performed at the saint's tomb. By the end of the sixth century the mass of legend that had grown up about the shrine of St. Martin was so great that Gregory of Tours devotes four of his eight books of *Miracula* to Martin, enumerating two hundred and six miracles worked after the saint's death. Gregory of Tours sincerely tried to be a historian; but how far superstitious credulity had incrustated itself upon the relatively simple legends told by Sulpicius may be illustrated by a single incident in Gregory's professed history of miracles, where he relates an adventure of a certain Ammonius, an officer of the holy church, who, after dinner, on one occasion, being rather drunk, was pushed, presumably by the enemy of souls, over the edge of a cliff about two hundred feet high. "While he was whirling about," says Gregory, "as he fell headlong, and was flying down without wings, he kept crying for aid from St. Martin at every instant of his fall. Then he felt as if he were tossed from a saddle by some one and he landed among the trees that were in the valley. And thus coming down slowly limb by limb he reached the ground without danger of death. However, that the plotter's undertaking might not seem to have been completely in vain, he suffered a slight injury in one foot. But he went to the glorious master's [Martin's] church and prayed and was relieved of all pain."

By this time all Gaul was aflame with devotion to the shrine of St. Martin, and henceforth miracles, history, and life fuse into one broad stream running down even into the present day. We may not linger to discuss Venantius Fortunatus with his four books of poetic biography of Martin, or to speak of the life written by the great scholar Alcuin, of Jacob von Vitry, of Caesar of Heisterbach, of the Golden Legend, or of the more modern wonders of the Abbé de Paris, and the monstrosities of the cult of "our lady of Lourdes." Perhaps the humble soul of Sulpicius would have shrunk back in protest could he have foreseen the enormous influence of his simple narrative upon the centuries to follow and along what favorite lines that influence has chosen to develop.